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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a project undertaken to examine the interaction between those who work in responsive-service systems, such as fire departments, the police, and the public utilities, and the urban citizens they serve. Briefly outlined are the project's sponsoring organizations, objectives, participating cities (Cincinnati, Kansas City, Miami, Rochester, San Diego, and Stamford), findings, and recommendations. The findings presented deal with the attitudes and expectations of the participants, the degree of commonality in the identification of problems and issues among the various responsive-services, and the significance of the collaborative method employed. Recommendations are directed mainly toward the "human dimension" in responsive-service delivery during urban emergencies and toward certain changes in conducting future projects similar to this one. (Author/EB)

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THE HUMAN DIMENSION IN URBAN RESPONSIVE SERVICES: TOWARD COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

SUMMARY

by Morton Bard and Harold M. Proshansky

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SUMMARY

Urban environments are physically and socially complex. They are densely populated, alive with the energy of human activity. These qualities have both positive and negative effects on the people who live in cities. The diversity of urban life provides opportunities that are unavailable elsewhere--museums, galleries, theaters, and shops abound; exposure to a variety of cultures and life-styles is almost inevitable. But the streets of a city are also full of strangers, people who feel no special responsibility for one another. It may be easy to maintain a sense of privacy in an urban environment, but it is also easy to feel alone. The psychological sense of security that comes from being connected to a social network can be difficult to achieve. And so the quality of urban life may be colored somewhat by a sense of anonymity and insecurity.

Feelings of insecurity are heightened in an emergency--a fire, for example, or a personal crime or a blackout. During these brief and intense "crisis" experiences, the citizen is helpless, overwhelmed by a situation that seems out of control. In a city, emergencies are likely to occur when one is among strangers, away from people who might help because they already know and care about the person under threat. Thus, the urban citizen is especially dependent upon the people in such responsive service systems as fire departments, the police, and the public utilities. The manner in which the people in these systems provide emergency services has a significant impact on the citizen's sense of security and thus on the quality of urban life.

Consider, for example, the dilemma of a young man who comes home from work one day to find his apartment burglarized. The thieves have torn the place apart, strewing his possessions from one end to the other. Stunned, he begins to assess the damage--his television set, stereo, clock radio, and several cameras are missing. The burglars even went through his closet and took all of his suits. The victim picks up the phone and dials the police.

The phone rings and rings; finally a police officer answers, takes the victim's name and address, and says that someone from the department will come and take a report. When the officers arrive sometime later, they are courteous and thorough, but they are clearly not impressed by this crime. The thieves are long gone; no one has been physically hurt. They tell the victim it could have been worse and remind him that, after all, he did leave his windows unlocked. After the officers leave, the young man tries to clean up the mess, but he feels depressed, alone and afraid.

The behavior of the police officers in this case has been perfectly correct by the standards of almost any department in the country. Yet the officers have missed an opportunity to be of more than routine service to a victim in need. Replaying the scene with some modifications may help to illustrate. Suppose, again, that the victim picks up his phone and dials the police. On the first ring, he is answered by a dispatcher who is able to send a patrol car to the victim's home quickly. The police listen with interest and sympathy as the victim shows them the damage and helps them construct a list of the stolen goods. The officers talk with the victim about how the burglars might have gained access to the apartment; they suggest that he may want to reinforce his window

locks to help prevent another burglary. Finally, they suggest that he call a friend to come and help with the cleanup. After the officers have left, the victim and his friend talk about how helpful the police have been and how glad they are they can count on them in an emergency.

Responsive-service systems such as police departments are usually evaluated in terms of the speed and efficiency with which they handle emergencies. But there is another dimension of their work that is just as crucial: the psychological and social interaction between those who provide service and those who receive it. This human dimension often determines the satisfaction experienced by both the service provider and the service receiver. When the human aspects of their encounter are ignored, the problems that arise during the emergency may be intensified for either or both parties.

The Project

The National Science Foundation has supported an effort by the Center for Social Research of the City University of New York (CUNY) to examine the interaction between those who work in responsive-service systems and the urban citizens they serve. The objective of this first effort was to develop a series of questions about the human dimension in responsive services. One final outcome of the project was a research agenda for further study in this area.

The International City Management Association (ICMA), a professional and educational organization for appointed municipal administrators in local governments, assisted in the project. They provided the practical expertise that "made it happen" by helping to select the participating cities, enlisting the interest of receptive city managers and serving as a resource during project activities. The responsive services selected for the project included the public safety systems (fire and police) and the public utility system. Six cities that represent the diversity of American urban life were chosen as participants--Cincinnati, Ohio; Kansas City, Missouri; Miami, Florida; Rochester, New York; San Diego, California; and Stamford, Connecticut.

It was decided at the onset of the project that the significance of the human dimension could be seen most clearly through a combination of several points of view: Service providers and receivers have the practical experience needed to identify the factors involved in the human interaction; behavioral scientists have the technical capacity to translate these factors into questions that can be addressed by the methods of social-science research. The collaboration between those who are actually involved in emergencies and those who want to study them provided a unique method for examining this question.

A Task Force was created in each participating city to address two questions: 1) Which aspects of the human encounter between service providers and service receivers in emergency situations most significantly affect the quality of urban life? 2) How can these aspects be studied? Each collaborative Task Force was composed of five people: a city manager, administrative and union representatives of the police, fire and/or public utilities systems, and a behavioral or social scientist. The Task Forces were constituted in the spring of 1977 and reported to the project staff in the fall of that year.

On December 1 and 2, 1977, a conference was held at the CUNY Graduate School and University Center in New York City on "Responsive Services and the Quality of Urban Life." The six Task Forces and the project staff met together for these two days to clarify and refine the ideas developed by each individual Task Force. Their ultimate goal was the preparation of an agenda for future research. During the first day of meetings, a number of invited guests also participated. Like the Task Force meetings, the conference provided opportunities for collaboration between behavioral researchers and responsive-service practitioners.

Among the findings of the project, some of the most exciting were surprises, results that had not been anticipated by most of the people involved. One of these had to do with the preconceptions and attitudes of the participants. Both researchers and service providers found that they had harbored certain inaccurate stereotypes about the "other side." Some researchers expected the service providers to be so oriented toward day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts matters that they would have no interest in rigorous theoretical discussion. The researchers discovered to their delight that this was not the case--the practitioners were extremely knowledgeable about theoretical issues and quite sophisticated intellectually.

On the other hand, some of the practitioners expected the researchers to be arrogant know-it-alls, incapable of listening to contributions from the real-world perspective. They, too, were pleasantly surprised; the researchers were reality oriented and open and willing to learn. In short, the quality of the exchange between responsive-service practitioners and behavioral researchers exceeded their expectations. It was not just a mechanistic exchange in which one provided the problems and the other provided research methods for solution. Instead, a true dialogue among peers took place with the potential for joint problem-solving on a high conceptual level.

Another unexpected finding was the degree of commonality in the identification of problems and issues among the various responsive services. The project staff were careful to select cities that were different from one another and to include representatives from fire, police, and public utility services on each of the Task Forces so that the widest possible group of problems and issues would emerge. Once this diverse group had been assembled, however, they all seemed to be talking about the same issues. Most areas of concern did not originate in any single responsive service; interracial tensions between service provider and service receiver were as likely to be found in fire departments as in police departments. Cities that are very different are nevertheless plagued by similar problems; Miami, Florida, and Rochester, New York, both have disaster-management problems although in one case the cause is hurricanes and in the other it is blizzards.

A third important finding of the project was the significance of the collaborative method employed. Practitioners from responsive-service systems and behavioral scientists were able to work together to focus on urban problems that can be addressed by research. This kind of collaboration promises to bridge the traditional distance between these two groups, a distance that has sometimes been characterized by mistrust. A great deal was learned during the project about the value of such collaborative efforts and about the conditions under which they are most likely to succeed.

The work of this project has been done in a time when American cities are under extraordinary stress. Throughout the country at local, state, and national levels, there is an increasing demand for more productive and economical management of cities. In this crisis atmosphere, the role of human relationships in the quality of urban life is easily forgotten. But the survival of our cities may well depend upon the degree to which human questions are raised and answered in the next decades.

Recommendations

This project has generated a great deal of useful information. What was learned in this first effort has implications for responsive-service systems, for social-science research, and for the quality of urban life. The project began the exploration of new territory, preparing the way for continued work in several areas.

One important finding has to do with what we have called "the human dimension" in responsive-service delivery during urban emergencies. The work of the Task Forces and the Conference confirmed our hypothesis that the human interaction between service deliverer and service receiver is important. Despite the fact that it was difficult for project participants to remain focused on this aspect, everyone agreed that the unit of analysis was of great potential significance. Many things are yet to be learned about the ways in which the different kinds of human interaction that can take place during emergencies affect the quality of urban life. We, therefore, recommend that others try to build knowledge about the human interaction in responsive-service delivery during urban emergencies.

Our second group of recommendations have to do with the actual conduct of the project reported here. We employed a method that included the selection of cities and Task Forces, meetings of the Task Forces, and a conference. The full body of this report explains the procedures used in detail and also offers close analysis of what was dysfunctional in those procedures. Here we will summarize the changes we would recommend for someone who planned to use a similar method. We, then, recommend certain changes in the conduct of future projects similar to this one.

1. The staff had too laissez-faire a role in the conduct of the project at several crucial points. In future projects, we recommend that the selection of all participants, especially the behavioral scientist, be a joint venture shared by the city manager and project staff. We also recommend that the staff be more actively involved in Task Force meetings so that discussions are kept on the most productive ground.

2. There were areas in which the staff did too much, as well. We recommend that the writing and editing of research issues and of the final project report be a joint task of the staff and Task Force participants since much of the conceptual synthesis that occurred was the result of these activities.

3. In the selection of personnel, we recommend that careful consideration be given to the proposed individuals' background, perspective, and experience in relation to the project topic. "Practitioner systems" or "behavioral scientist,"

for example, are much too broad to be used as categories for personnel selection; one must ask: What kind of practitioner systems? What roles within the system need representation? What sort of background should the behavioral scientist have? And so on.

4. We recommend that care and planning be given to structuring incentives for collaboration which take into account the reward structures of both the research and practitioner systems. The enthusiasm of the project staff alone is not usually sufficient incentive for other participants; they must be able to see what the project will do for them.

5. The project described in this report focused on an aspect of emergency service delivery that was both unfamiliar and difficult to grasp: the fact that contemporary American society has overlooked and undervalued the human dimension in the provision of emergency services. Some of the difficulties encountered during the project can be traced to insufficient understanding of that concept on the part of both project staff and participants. We recommend that future projects focusing on this aspect or one of similar unfamiliarity provide for a longer period of orientation and practice with the project concept at the onset of the work.

6. The Task Forces and the Conference groups were charged in this project with the "analysis, consideration, and discussion" of the human dimension in emergency service delivery. This proved to be an insufficiently defined task. We recommend that there be more specific task definition in future projects, with clear statements of the expected product and of the process by which it is to be achieved so that the groups will seek to do the same thing and know when they have accomplished their goal.

The single most important result of the project was not foreseen when the work was first proposed. Its significance became apparent only as the work progressed; indeed, some of the participants became fully aware of its impact only after the project was over. We refer to the collaborative method, an approach whereby practitioners and researchers join together to work as coaccountable partners in the research task.

The value of this researcher-practitioner collaboration cannot be overstated. Addressing the problems of society has become one of the functions of applied social science, and procedures must be developed which accomodate the practical "givens" of research outside the laboratory while conforming to the standards of scientific inquiry. Real-world systems have significant problems whose solution might be sought through research, but most existing research products are not applicable or cannot be transferred to the systems needing them. If researchers and practitioners collaborate in research from its inception, the needs of both groups can be met.

The collaborative methods can be broadly applied to all sorts of systems and all sorts of problems. The interaction between researcher and practitioner might be appropriately applied to programs with a problem-solving focus, programs with a training focus, and others. We, therefore, recommend that the collaboration between practitioners and researchers be more fully explored in a variety of frameworks.

Copies of the full project report are available upon request from:

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